

THE MURLE TRIBE: An Analysis of Its Conflicts

with the Nuer, Dinka and
Government of South Sudan

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Author Background

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Cover image: Silhouette of tribal markings belonging to a young girl from the Karo Tribe in Murle, Omo Valley, Ethiopia. Source: Wikimedia

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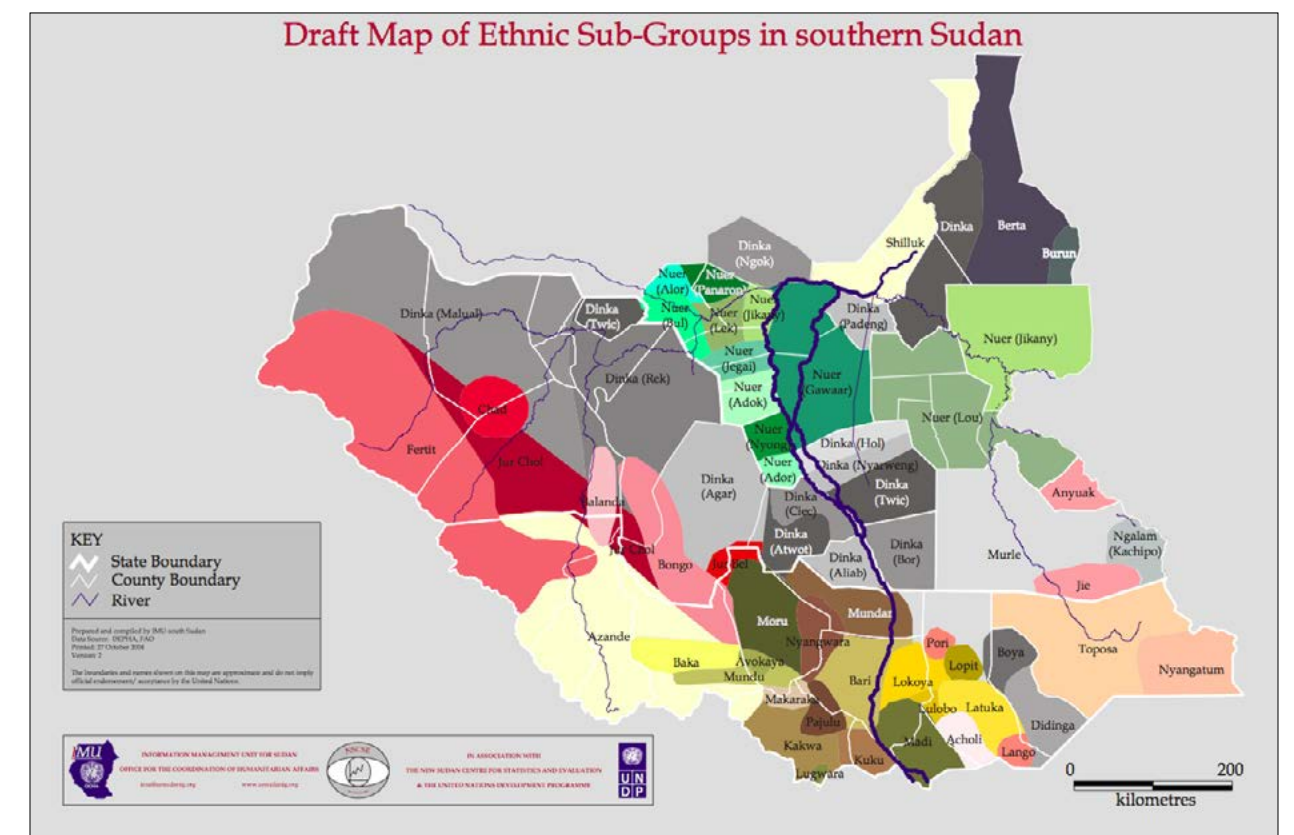
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A Neighborhood in Conflict:

The ongoing conflict between the Murle tribe of Jonglei in South Sudan and neighboring tribes such as the Lou Nuer is entrenched in the region as a result of conflicting claims about water, land used for grazing, persistent cattle raids, and child abductions.¹ In particular, cattle raids among the tribes have escalated into high-casualty incidents that threaten to disrupt stability in the entire state. With the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005 between Sudan and South Sudan's rebels, many assumed the country's independence in 2011 would end the ethnic and intertribal cycle of conflicts. This paper analyzes the Murle's conflicts with other tribes in the area to determine how these conflicts could affect stability in Jonglei. Specifically, the paper examines how cultural, demographic, and geographic factors shape the Murle's role in the South Sudan-Sudan conflict and the tribe's relations with the central government in Juba and with other tribes in Jonglei.²

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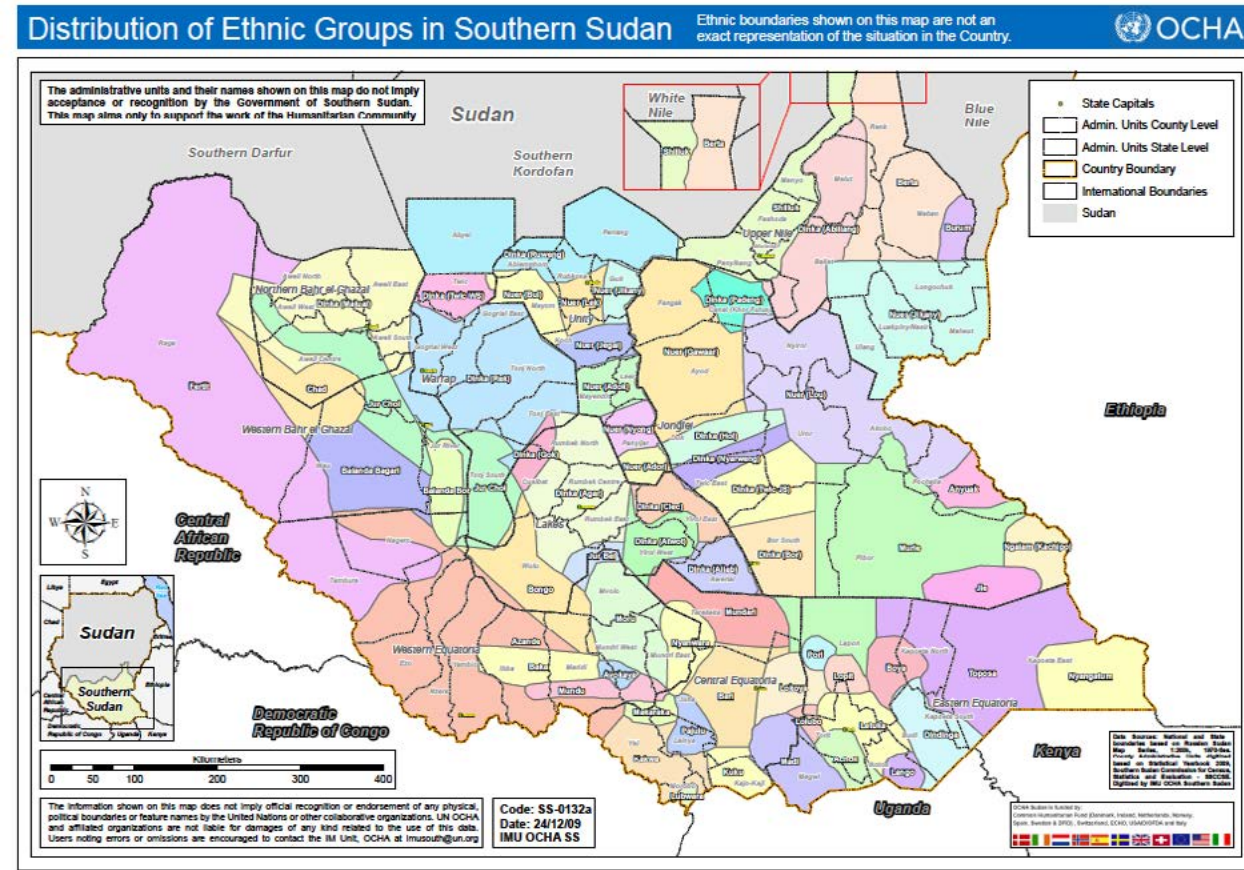
The unique cultural characteristic that most distinguishes the Murle from other tribes is “age-set,” essentially a stratification into several age-related categories that provides young people with significant tribal decision-making power and helps bind Murle people together. Age-set is also one of the main factors that have escalated the conflict; it has brought new leaders to the top, replacing the traditional tribal organization. This increased the Murle’s mobility, fighting strength, and territory in southeast Jonglei. Arms proliferation due to the civil war, environmental impacts, and lack of an effective government in Juba are other contributing factors that prolonged the conflicts.



Background: Factors Behind the Historical Intertribal Conflict in Southeast Jonglei

The Murle tribe’s present geographical location bordering the Dinka to the west and the Lou Nuer to the north is a contributing factor to the ongoing conflict in South Sudan. This was not the Murle’s original location. As the tribe moved northwest, heading for the Pibor River system, it pushed the Lou Nuer further north and the Dinka toward the Nile River to the west. The Nuer in particular have been angry over the loss of their land, and have made armed conflict over grazing land, cattle raids, and abductions of children a cyclical, permanent feature of intertribal relations.

The effect of the Murle tribe’s intertribal conflicts in South Sudan is largely blamed for the destabilization of oil-rich Jonglei. The conflicts forced international organizations and oil businesses out of the area after the CPA in 2005, which led to the independence of South Sudan in July 2011.



During the civil war the spread of weapons that replaced traditional weapons historically used by tribes in southeast Jonglei had a markedly adverse effect on intertribal conflict, giving the conflicting tribes the power to engage in more lethal attacks and counterattacks that left many dead, displaced and vulnerable. It was during this period that former theology student and then rebel leader David Yau Yau assumed leadership of the Murle tribe.

Government intervention to put an end to the tribal conflict in the Jonglei area was neither entirely neutral nor lawful. The army, dominated by former Dinka and Nuer militia members, launched a brutal weapons-collection operation in the region, leaving the Murle communities more defenseless than before. Mass rape of women and murder of the Murle children drove the Murle to seek weapons across the border in Ethiopia. The serious attacks that Yau Yau’s supporters, known as the COBRA faction, waged against the government’s army, the UN mission’s personnel, and other central government interests were blamed for the region’s lack of development and for slowing the government’s efforts to utilize the oil resources considered crucial for the country’s development.



David Yau Yau. Used with permission of the photographer.

Eruption of fierce fighting in the region

The Murle hierarchical structure is somewhat similar to those of other tribes in that it includes, in part, spiritual leaders (red chiefs) and elders (wise men). However, the Murle tribe, which originally migrated from Ethiopia, has one aspect of its tribal structure that is uniquely different from those of its neighboring tribes:³ Traditionally, in other South Sudanese tribes, elders and spiritual leaders are responsible for decision making on critical issues. In the Murle tribe,

while traditional red chief spiritual leaders and elders lead the tribal decision-making process, the above-mentioned unique “age-set” organization tightly binds generational cohorts. This means that younger age-sets can, in the right context, have an unusual degree of power and a voice in the Murle tribe’s decision-making process.⁴ Jon Arensen, a Houghton College professor of anthropology who has lived with the Murle for over 18 years, sums it up this way:

“Since there is little hierarchy, the cohesive factor that holds Murle society together is the highly functional age-sets. These are well-defined groups of men based on age, and I regard them as the core social force among the Murle. The younger age-sets are a fighting force and take on the important role of protecting the tribe from outsiders.”⁵

As a result of the developing civil war, the power shift to the younger generation intensified the conflict and intimidated other tribes in the region, leading to more frequent and more violent “tit-for-tat” raids. This shift occurred during the second South Sudan rebellion in 1983, when the

Murle warriors in Jonglei, South Sudan - “Murle People – The Cattle Loving Warrior People of South Sudan, Jonglei State,” Trip Down Memory Lane Blog, 7 Aug 2013, <http://kwekudee-tripdownmemorylane.blogspot.com/2013/08/murle-people-cattle-loving-warrior.html>



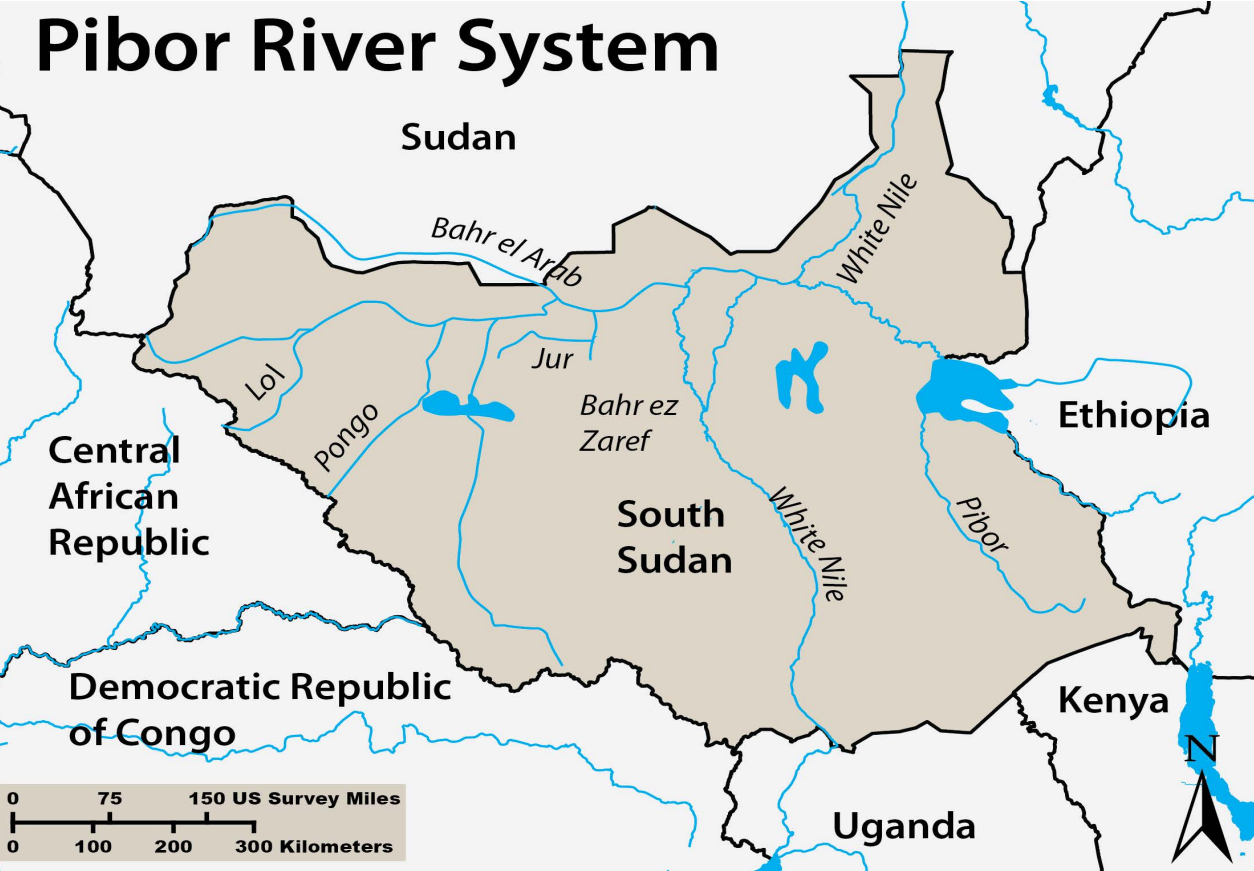
dynamics of the tribal conflicts, previously based on cattle raids and abductions of women and children, changed. Driven by fear of losing their entire home area to their historical enemies, the Lou Nuer and Dinka, the Murle’s priorities were focused on binding the tribe into one fighting force. This worked to reduce the damage from raids by other tribes and signaled the Murle’s seriousness in defending their land and assets, while internally the Murle’s power drive was constantly transforming to adapt to the quantity and quality of attacks waged by its rivals. The younger generation of fighters adopted new tactics, replacing the elder’s traditional approach to conflict resolution, such as negotiating deals with other tribes during cattle raids and using soft diplomacy. The change was due to the aggressive nature of the younger age-set trying to assume power and fame as fighters. The younger generations were also eager to wage more cattle raids for dowries to start their own families. The power drive shifted to a much younger generation and resulted in out-of-control cattle raids and abductions of women and children.

Meanwhile, the ongoing civil war in South Sudan became more complex after negotiations between the government of Sudan and the rebels from 1985 to 1989 failed. In a June 1989 coup the Muslim Brotherhood seized power in Sudan, and South Sudan was introduced to a religious type of warfare and invasion, escalating the conflict both regionally and internationally. As a result, the Murle’s regional conflicts continued to develop with more severe fighting, which involved Lou Nuer, leading to the destruction and isolation of the Jonglei region.

The agrarian Murle settled in the Boma Plateau area, while the cattle-focused Murle moved to the northeast Pibor River system; however, these two areas were, home to Dinka and Lou Nuer tribes. When the Murle moved in they fought with those two tribes, pushing the Dinka west toward the Nile River and Lou Nuer to the north. Thus, as partly a pastoral community and partly an agrarian community, the Murle tribe has been seeking the best spot for water sources and land for grazing.⁶ Unfortunately, these components happen to be available only between the two most powerful tribes, the Lou Nuer and Dinka.

The Murle tribe’s mobilization in southeast Jonglei during dry seasons also plays a role in the conflict. For the Pibor Murle and their neighboring Lou Nuer and Dinka, cattle are central to these communities’ livelihoods and their social and cultural systems. Fighting results from the severe drought during the long dry season, which has been intensifying over the past two decades due to environmental changes - lack of rain leading to fewer streams and rivers - in the Jonglei region. Soon after the dry season begins in January, when the river recedes, Murle groups begin traveling in search of grazing lands. This move gradually takes them to Dinka and Nuer lands, where disputes over grazing spark conflicts. This has impacted pastoral tribes in the entire region. For example, the Pibor Murle have suffered greatly by the presence of tribes whose cultures promote practices such as cattle raids for wedding dowries, abductions of women and children for tribal strength and, most of all, attacks to acquire even more land for grazing and water resources. (See appendix 1, table 1 for attacks between the Murle and the Luo Nuer tribes between 2009- 2012 in Jonglei).⁷

Pibor River System



The Murle’s move to these areas has defined the conflict, and success in these conflicts has given them some superiority over their neighbors. Having fought their way to these locations, the Murle now have a better understanding of the geography of southeast Jonglei. To continue to protect their interests in the area they have learned to adapt to their new environments.

The effect of the Murle tribe’s intertribal conflicts on the ongoing conflict in South Sudan is largely blamed for the destabilization of oil-rich Jonglei. Distracted from supporting the war campaign against Sudan, the Murle tribe has focused on protecting itself from attacks by other tribes in the region. Soon after the signing of the 2005 CPA the transitional government in Juba, predominantly controlled by Dinka and Nuer, was informed of the conflict in that region. Because of its oil reserves, water and vast geography, Jonglei is considered one of the country’s national treasures. Therefore, the government is more interested in ending the violence in order to gain the trust of foreign oil businesses and prospective foreign investors. Government interest in the region has been strongly rejected by the Murle, whose leaders claimed that the central government, dominated by Dinka and Nuer, was focusing only on these communities in Jonglei, most likely due to the oil reserves. The Murle tribe has vowed to continue fighting for the semi-autonomous land and to protect itself from attack by the Dinka and Nuer tribes.

After losing the 2010 local elections, David Yau Yau rebelled against the central government and accused it of rigging the process.⁸ After waging attacks against government troops and other organizations in the area, Yau Yau’s name quickly spread throughout regional and international media, which helped to further his cause by prompting individuals and groups disenfranchised by the government to lash out and join his movement, waging more lethal attacks. As a result, the central government agreed to negotiate with Yau Yau as a Murle leader. They reached an agreement and he was given the title of major general in the South Sudan army.

The spread of weapons

According to a report by the Small Arms Survey,⁹ South Sudan has been one of the regions affected by the civil war, and thus the spread of weapons such as AK-47, RPGs, and PKM rifles has been increasing, as tribes are protecting their members, cattle and land.¹⁰ Locals seeking weapons in the area have had easy success acquiring them due mostly to the open borders between South Sudan, Uganda, Ethiopia, and Sudan.

The area most affected by this dynamic shift in weapons spread was southeast Jonglei, where the Murle share land for grazing and water sources. The excessive use of automatic weapons has established new rules in the area to cope with the level of damage and destruction they cause.

After cattle raids, elders of involved tribes would traditionally mediate a deal to avoid revenge from the attacked tribe. With an agreed-upon level of damage resulting from spear-and-knife attacks, deals were likely reached and accepted by the victims. This practice has changed with the introduction of automatic weapons, many from the Sudan-South Sudan war, which cause destruction exceeding the ability of elders to resolve in a traditional mediation meeting.

Government intervention to put an end to the tribal conflict in the Jonglei area was neither entirely neutral nor lawful. With an army composed of former militia members, primarily from the Dinka and Nuer tribes, the government in Juba launched a brutal weapons-collection operation in the region, leaving the Murle communities more defenseless than before.

The Lou Nuer devised a plan to counterattack the Murle and eliminate it from South Sudan. More than 6,000 fighters of the Lou Nuer -- the White Army -- attacked the Murle, displacing hundreds of thousands, setting fires to homes, and abducting women and children in the Pibor area of Jonglei.¹¹ Three thousand Murle tribesmen were feared massacred. The attack was widely reported by human rights and international organizations working on humanitarian missions in the area.¹² By then, South Sudan had its own government.

As a newly founded country, South Sudan's central government has suffered from the effects of coping with destabilized borders with Sudan, internal ethnic tension, and accusations of government officials' corruption. To many citizens, the government failed to address critical issues regarding the country's stability. In recent polls conducted by the government and financed by USAID,¹³ most of the citizens expressed fear over security issues, including, but not limited to, cattle raids and the abductions of children and women. In particular, people of southeast Jonglei have expressed fear of losing their cattle. With the frequency and severity of attacks escalating to their highest level, interrupting the well-being, lifestyle, and productivity of these communities, the administration of South Sudan intervened in 2012 to put an end to the conflict.

Disarmament programs were meant to stem future attacks; more than 12,000 weapons were collected through the process, which left the Murle open to atrocities such as torture, waterboarding and widespread rape.¹⁴ This drove some of the tribe's members to cross the border into Ethiopia to hide their weapons until the end of the disarmament campaign, which later contributed to the intensified fight against the government and other organizations. The UN mission in South Sudan issued a statement asking the government to launch a peaceful disarmament program that would respect human rights and end the cyclical violence in the area. The Murle tribe firmly stood for its rights, defending its members, land, and cattle, and accusing the administration of supporting the Dinka and Lou Nuer tribes.

Despite his civilian background, Yau Yau was able to cause more trouble for the government by leading a small but enthusiastic group of young fighters, destabilizing the situation in Pibor and nearby counties in 2010 after he failed in the local election. In 2011 he signed a ceasefire with the government and was appointed as a general in the South Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA). He rebelled again in April 2012 soon after more atrocities had been committed against civilians. His second rebellion led to the suspension of the disarmament program and the government's focus on neutralizing the rebels and their leader.¹⁵

Future trends and readings of the peace process in South Sudan.

Since South Sudan's independence in July 2011, which put an end to one of history's longest civil wars, the country has again been afflicted by ethnic violence that continues to severely damage the image of Africa's newest nation. Given the ethnic and cultural dimensions at the heart of cattle raids and the abduction of women and children, keeping order in South Sudan is becoming more difficult for a central government accused of corruption and marginalization of regions based on ethnic backgrounds.

In southeast Jonglei, where the cyclical conflict between the Murle and Lou Nuer has resulted in the death of thousands and displaced many more, the conflict is, in part, based on these same cultural roles and ethnic dimensions. The government launched a disarmament program to end the violence, but it was ineffective and instead further complicated intertribal conflict. The government's atrocities left some of the tribes, such as the Murle, vulnerable. This led to Yau Yau's rebellion to end the central government's absolute control over power and resources. The following are factors behind possible scenarios with regards to the future of the region:

- *The Greater Pibor Administrative Area (GPAA) Agreement.* On 28 March 2014 David Yau Yau and the government of South Sudan signed an agreement to end the Murle leader's four-year rebellion against the central government.¹⁶ The GPAA secured a semi-autonomous area for the Murle and other minorities, setting a historic precedent for Sudan and South Sudan.¹⁷ The South Sudan Democratic Movement (SSDM) Cobra Faction, which signed the deal with the government, has the chance to manage pasture and water sources in the region, potentially ending a long history of tribal and ethnic violence over the same sources that led to killings, displacements, and other atrocities committed against the people of Jonglei. As previously noted, the latest peace agreement is, in fact, not the first one that David Yau Yau had signed with his government. It was the second since his first rebellion in 2010. He accepted the president's amnesty in 2011, but then rebelled again in 2012.

The GPAA has been hailed by members of the communities in Jonglei but questioned by

many others in South Sudan. It is a game-changer that practically put an end to a four-year rebellion in the Jonglei area. Its impact on the communities of the Pibor area was immediate despite its having not yet been ratified. It put an end to the tit-for-tat attacks that left the communities in a state of war. The question, however, is still whether the GPAA agreement is going to be the long-anticipated remedy or the motivation behind the disintegration of the newly founded country, as some communities rejected it or pressed for their own increased autonomy.

- *Communities that have rejected the GPAA.* Even with the government's assurance that precedence-setting was not the goal of the agreement,¹⁸ many ethnic groups and small communities think otherwise. For example, the Jiye community¹⁹ distanced itself from the GPAA shortly after the deal was brokered. Upon declining association with the GPAA agreement, members of the Jiye community congratulated the country's president and the rebel leader after the agreement was signed, then requested the creation of their own independent county for the Najie greater community. The Anyuak tribe of Akobo followed the Jiye and clarified its position on the GPAA agreement.
- *The Anyuak tribes divided into two regions in Jonglei:* the Akobo area and the Pochalla area, with the two communities having distinct reactions to the GPAA agreement. While the Akobo Anyuak distanced their community from it, the Pochalla Anyuak has agreed to join the Murle tribe and even celebrated with them the day the agreement was signed. Complicating the agreement, the Anyuak community in general has a history of conflicts with the Murle and could at any time renew the fight as the only method of settling their differences. The entire area is at risk of being thrown into chaos again if members of these communities included in the GPAA have reason to distrust the Murle leadership, in particular David Yau Yau, to maintain peace in the GPAA. With the gains earned from the GPAA, which left the door open for the Murle to have a separate state within Jonglei, Yau Yau could conceivably rebel again to accomplish his tribe's dream.

- *The Ongoing Conflict Between the President Salva Kiir Mayardit and Former Vice President Riek Machar.* In the event that the negotiation between the president of South Sudan and his former deputy concludes with a deal to end the cycle of violence that broke out at the beginning of 2014, the government of Juba would be obligated to respect the GPAA if it is ratified now. This would retain peace in that region and open the door for development projects in Jonglei to grow, bringing in more job opportunities for these young fighters rather than leaving them to prepare for a new war. With all these possibilities in mind, the situation in South Sudan is always unpredictable – fluid and entirely uncontrollable in some instances.
- *Ethnic violence has been deeply rooted in these communities due to social, economic, environmental and cultural reasons.* South Sudan, by taking actions to end marginalization and equally share its oil resources with other regions for sustainable development, could possibly help end the current conflict between the Murle and Lou Nuer by creating a stable region where oil and water resources could be used by the entire country's population.
- *The possibility of other tribes seeking similar agreements.* Events in South Sudan are dynamic. The entire region is awaiting the ratification of the GPAA to put an end to the speculation and give the Murle hope of living in peace away from the Dinka and Nuer in southeast Jonglei. An important question is, will the GPAA end the cyclical attacks between the Murle and the Lou Nuer? The answer could open the door for other tribes in South Sudan to seek similar agreements if peace becomes an ultimate result of the GPAA agreement. Nuer Kingdom, Shuluk Kingdom, Anyuak Kingdom and other similar tribes and communities in South Sudan have their grievances and mistrust the central government. If any of these communities or tribes decide to compete against the government, South Sudan's disintegration could be inevitable in the near future.

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APPENDIX 1

Table 1- Major clashes between Lou Nuer and Murle in Jonglei, 2009–12

Date	Attacking Tribe	Location of Attacks	Deaths (approximate)	Cattle stolen (approximate)
January 2009	Murle	Akobo county	300 (Lou Nuer)	Unknown
5-8 March 2009	Lou Nuer	Likuangole, Pibor county	450 (Murle)	600
18 April 2009	Murle	Akobo county	250 (Luo Nuer)	Unknown
6 February 2011	Murle	Uror county	8 (Luo Nuer)	1,000
18-24 April 2011	Luo Nuer	Likuangole, Pibor county	200 (Murle)	138.000
15-24 June 2011	Luo Nuer	Gumurk and Likuangole, Pibor county	400 Murle	398,000
18 August 2011	Murle	Pieri, Uror county	750 (Lou Nuer)	38,000
23 Dec. 2011- 9 Jan. 2012	Lou Nuer	Likuangole and Pibor, Pibor county	1,000 (Murle)	100,000
27 Jan.- 4 Feb 2012	Murle	Akobo, Nyirol, and Uror counties	276 (Lou Nuer and Bor Dinka)	60,000
2 March 2012	Murle	Nyirol county	15 (Lou Nuer)	15,000
9-11 March 2012	Murle	Ethiopia (Near Wanding payam)	225 (Lou Nuer)	20,000